

Nestor Saéns Store
Hidalgo Street & Juarez Alley
Roma, Texas

HABS TEX 3129

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Western Office, Division of Design and Construction
San Francisco, California

NESTOR SAÉNS STORE

Roma, Starr County, Texas

HARC
TEX.
214-6044

ADDRESS: Hidalgo Street & Juarez Alley
OWNER: Guerra Estate
OCCUPANT: Not occupied
USE: Storage building for machinery

PART I: HISTORICAL INFORMATION

This structure is an excellent type of merchandising building---such merchandising being a result of more than forty years of development along the Rio Grande. The Saéns (or Saéñz) family date from the original Escandón settlement during the Eighteenth Century. The lot on which the structure was built was originally owned by the Garcia family of Roma. During October, 1844, the lot was sold to Nestor Saéns.¹

The building was used as a oantina (saloon), liquor being stored in a basement oellar below. Supplies came either by barge from Rio Grande City, or overland by carreta (ox-cart). During one period, the structure was used temporarily as a school classroom.

The structure is perhaps more significant as an architeotural work than in terms of historic interest. Excellent proportions, good handling of detail, and a mastery of the techniques of rubbed brickwork all add to its success as a building.

The architect-builder was Heinrich Portscheller. Portscheller was born in Germany about 1840. After spending some time with the Prussian army, he presumably deserted with a fellow soldier by the name of Frederik Ellert. Ultimately, the two soldiers found themselves in the port of Vera Cruz, Mexico, about 1865. They were immediately impressed into the French army. It is probable that they were assigned to an extremely mobile unit labeled "contre-guerillas," whose duty was the very strenuous activity against Liberal Guerilla units in Northern Mexico.

As relations between various European states began to disintegrate on the continent, national groups represented by these countries fighting as

¹ Barrera, Cecelio R. "Architecture in Roma Between 1871-1883."
(unpublished high school manuscript).

allies for Maximilian in Mexico began not only to question the loyalty of each other, but began to concern themselves regarding the support of Maximilian's cause. There was much pressure by agents of General Mariano Escobedo to desert, and, by mid 1866, many Germans were reported to have deserted from "contre-guerilla" units as they moved northward into Tamaulipas. The Liberal General Escobedo hoped to forge deserters into a common fighting unit, feeling that individuals fighting with the threat of a noose about their necks would prove formidable allies against the forces of Maximilian.

It is not known precisely when Ellert and Portscheller deserted, but Ellert is reported as residing in Rio Grande City by early June, 1866; and it seems reasonable that Portscheller was residing in the same neighborhood.

At any rate, both men participated on the Liberal side under General Escobedo in the Battle of Santa Gertrudis, which occurred about two miles east of the village of Camargo on the 15th of June, 1866. This battle resulted in the absolute defeat of the Imperial forces engaged--the participants defeated consisting of about 300 Austrians and 1000 Mexicans. A French garrison occupying the town of Mier during this action made no attempt to succor their allies, but sacked the town of Mier and retreated southward on hearing of the battle at Camargo.

Ellert returned to Rio Grande City following the engagement of Camargo, and it is believed that Portscheller continued to reside in the same neighborhood. Ellert was married about 1870; and, though he was probably on the Rio Grande, Portscheller's whereabouts are undetermined until we find record of his marriage to Leonarda Campos in Mier about 1879. It is probable that Portscheller developed confidence in others as to his abilities as a "baumeister" during this unknown period (his age 30-39).

The Portschellers resided in Mier (where their first child was born in 1881) after their marriage, but moved across the river to Roma, Texas before 1883.

In Roma, Portscheller established the very necessary brickyard for the manufacture of a very attractive, salmon buff, sand struck, large (2 3/4 by 4 1/8 by 8 3/4 inches) brick. In partnership with him were Mr. Margo and Mr. Perez.

By October 29, 1884, Portscheller had made known his intentions of becoming an American citizen.

Local masons considered it quite an honor to work for Portscheller, and he was never without an abundance of apprentices. One mason interviewed in Rio Grande City (Don José Barbosa) worked for Portscheller for three years. Don José mentioned that Don Enrique (Portscheller) would prepare the plans, make templates for the mouldings, and the other masons would then rub or cut the bricks to the profiles determined. Portscheller would personally lay up the work involving the intricate architectural profiles, while the other masons would do the standard fill-in work between. Portscheller's inspiration seems to have come from the standard carpenter's manuals of the mid-nineteenth century, but his interpretation of them in terms of scale and proportion must be acknowledged as the interpretation of a skilled artist.

Two items of interest in terms of construction are as follows. For one thing, fermented cactus juice was used in the mortar. Cactus leaves were chopped quite finely and allowed to steep for several weeks prior to actual use. The liquor thus fermented was mixed into the mortar as an additive. The other item of interest ~~was~~ that the lime was burned locally, using mesquite as a fuel. The lime was cured for several weeks prior to use.

Some of the masons who worked for Portscheller were Placido Palacios, Ensenbio Cabazos, Pancho Lopez, Margarto Garza, Adolfo Hinojosa, and Ponecio Caneles.

In 1894, Portscheller moved his family to Laredo. He built many houses and cisterns there, an iron bridge in south Laredo, and the old Saint Peter's Church.

About 1900, he went to Monterrey to build buildings for the college, returning to Laredo afterwards. He died in 1915, aged 75, and is buried in the Protestant cemetery at Laredo.

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PART II: ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. Architectural Interest and Merit: This structure, built in 1884, is one to inspire keen interest not only to those engaged in the practice of architecture, but to the appreciative layman as well. The overall proportions and the quality of the brickwork is excellent, but the handling of classic detail adjacent to the openings indicates the work of an inspired artist-craftsman. The condition of the fabric is quite poor, though the arid quality of the region will do much for its continued preservation. The building is L-shaped in plan, with two large rooms. There is a cellar below for storage purposes.

B. Technical Description of the Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions. The greatest dimensions of the 'L' are sixty two feet, one inch by forty nine feet, two inches. The rooms are nineteen feet, seven inches (outside to outside), and twenty one feet, five and a half inches (outside to outside).
2. Foundations. Brick, continuous bearing. The bearing capacity of the soil is excellent, being firm sandstone just under the surface.
3. Wall construction. Brick bearing.
4. Porches. Walkways on north and east sides elevated to form a continuous podium.
5. Chimneys. One only remaining, and it is brick. There probably were metal chimneys as well in the original structure.
6. Openings. Four panel, double doors, in all openings. Barred, glass transom above for light. Doors made of cypress hung in pine frames. One window only on south facade. Four panel wood (cypress) casements, solid and not glazed.
7. Roof. Pine beams (moulded bead at bottom edges) supporting cypress decking covered over with about ~~two~~ inches (or more in places) of 'chipichil'-a local concrete which translated means 'concrete with pea gravel.' Brick parapets all around capped with bricks, souppers on the south and west slopes to non-existent gutters and downspouts. Classic moulded brickwork on north and east cornices. That the roof leaked when it rained must have been evident. Questioning local authorities on the subject, the reply was 'that it didn't really rain very much, and everyone expected such leakage.' (José Barbosa).

C. Technical Description of the Interior:

1. Floor plans. See 'Architectural Interest and Merit' on page 4.
2. Stairways. None.
3. Flooring. 1 by 4 inch tongue and groove pine.
4. Wall and ceiling finish. Walls smoothly plastered on interior; ceilings have exposed wooden beams and decking.
5. Doorways and doors. Four paneled cypress; trim is pine.
6. Trim. Trim is minimal. Where it exists, it is non-moulded pine.
7. Hardware. Not important.
8. Lighting. Probably used kerosene lamps.
9. Heating. Remains of a wood burning fireplace constructed of brick with wood mantel and trim on south facade of main room. Other heating probably from cast iron stoves.

D. Site:

1. Orientation. Principal facade is the Hidalgo Street side, and this facade (which we call 'east') is northeast.
2. Enclosures. None extant. There probably was a corral at the rear.
3. Outbuildings. None extant. There probably were privies and animal buildings originally. The south wall absorbed and originally abutted an older limestone structure, which is now destroyed. Remnants of this structure exist in the ruined south wall).
4. Walks. Brick elevated walkways on Juarez Alley as well as on Hidalgo Street. Entrance to cellar was on Juarez Alley.
5. Landscaping, gardens, etc. None extant.

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10 February 1962

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2 April 1962